

Study: SBI scandal changing North Carolinians view of death penalty

CHRONICLE STAFF REPORT

A non-profit agency that works to ensure that capital defendants get fair trials is applauding the results of a recent survey that shows that more than two-thirds of North Carolinians believe executions should be halted in the wake of the SBI scandal.

In the summer, an audit showed that the State Bureau of Investigation, whose lab processes physical evidence for virtually every trial in North Carolina, had withheld or misrepresented the results of blood tests that would have been favorable to the defendants in more than 200 cases.

In three of those cases, the defendants had already been executed, and four more are on death row. The state is looking at ways to reform the lab's practices, but few concrete changes have been made and none of the tainted cases have been fully investigated.

Public Policy Polling surveyed 517 North Carolina voters between

Nov. 19 and Nov. 21. Eighty percent of respondents identified themselves as either moderate or conservative, and half of those surveyed voted for John McCain in 2008.

Sixty-eight percent of people surveyed said executions should be halted until problems with blood tests at the State Bureau of Investigation are fully investigated. Fifty-eight percent of respondents believe a finding of racial bias should prohibit an execution, and more than two-thirds say that they are willing to consider ending the death penalty due to the high cost of capital punishment, a new poll shows.

"This poll showed us that people

of all political affiliations have grave concerns about how the death penalty is used in North Carolina," said Mark Kleinschmidt, executive director of the Fair Trial Initiative in Durham. "We all care about truth, fairness and efficiency in a system that hands down the ultimate punishment."

"The voters clearly told us that they do not want people to be executed unless we can be absolutely sure that they got a fair trial," said Kleinschmidt. "Right now, there are just too many questions hanging over our capital punishment system."

Also in the summer, a comprehensive study revealed that racial bias still taints capital trials.

The study, by researchers at Michigan State University School of Law, showed that those convicted of killing white victims are almost three times as likely to get a death sentence as those who kill minorities. The study also found that black jurors are being disproportionately excluded from capital juries.



Kleinschmidt



Photos by Layla Farmer

From left: Class participants Patricia Conrad, Constance Grier, Geraldine Garbutt, Linda Batts and James Gilliam.

Computers

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pily typing away at a computer two times a week at the Winston-Salem Urban League. She has learned how to send an email, and is thrilled at the opportunities her growing skill set will afford her.

"It gives me courage to want to go further and learn some other things too," remarked the great grandmother of seven.

Conrad is one of many senior citizens who are crossing the digital divide with the help of the Urban League's Digital Inclusion Initiative (DII), which utilizes peer coaches (ages 55 and up) and a self-paced learning model to promote computer literacy among seniors.

"The idea was to get seniors computer literate, whether it is for a job or whether it is to stay in contact with friends, family and church members," Program Coordinator Clay Ragan said of DII, which is offered to people age 50 and up free of charge. "Our goal is to give them a firm foundation that they can build on and explore on their own."

The social interaction with peers is also a draw for many seniors, Ragan said.

Constance Grier has worked part time as a peer coach for the last year. Grier, 58, spent 27 years at Wachovia bank before being laid off in 2003. She enrolled in the Urban League's Senior Employment Program and soon found a place where her computer skills were needed.

"It's awesome," she said of being a peer coach. "I just get such pleasure from helping the seniors, and they get so excited."

The DII, which is funded by the U.S. Department of Labor and disseminated through Senior Service America, was piloted in four sites last year, and expanded to include the maximum 12 sites in an eight county area in Northwest NC because of the overwhelming response, Ragan explained. Three hundred and seventy five sen-



James Gilliam works on an exercise on Generations Online.

iors have taken advantage of the program in Winston-Salem alone, he said. The classes use a program called Generations Online, which is geared specifically towards older adults. Through the program, they learn how to type, use a mouse, send an email, and even chat online with fourth graders from across the country and abroad. As many as 60 seniors visit the Urban League's 15-computer lab on a weekly basis to take part in the classes.

Among them is Geraldine Garbutt. Garbutt, a 60 year-old Winston-Salem native, spent 35 years in New York City before returning to her childhood home. She had taken computer classes at the World Trade Centers prior to the devastating September 11 attacks, but said it didn't stick with her. This time around, Garbutt, a grandmother of seven, says things are starting to click.

"Now, I can't stay away from the keyboard," she declared, adding that she enjoys playing jigsaw puzzle and word games on the computer. "It's awesome; it just gets me going. Sometimes, I stay on the computer for hours!"

Peer Coach Linda Batts, a former LPN from Detroit, Michigan, says she is honing her own computer skills as she helps the others along. Batts, 62, says she understands the anxiety some of her students feel about computers.

"I just say, 'Look, you're smart people, you can do

this," she related. "You just have to let go of that resistance, like I did, and learn something new."

Eighty eight year-old James Gilliam was well into his retirement from RJ Reynolds before the Computer Age took hold. During the time Gilliam was coming up, most of the information he got was "through the grapevine," as he puts it. But many of his friends have honed their computer skills, and Gilliam said he succumbed to the peer pressure. The great grandfather of three says he's glad he did.

"It's amazing, just what you can find out and what you can learn," he said.

The Urban League partners with other local agencies and is always looking for new students for the program, which the Urban League will take over funding for at the start of the 2011 fiscal year, Ragan said. At 25, computer literacy was hardly ever a question for him, but Ragan says he has learned many other things from the seniors in the program.

"For me, it was so cool when I started because I got to interface with the seniors," related the UNC alumnus. "I was teaching them stuff and they were teaching me stuff. They give me all sorts of advice. It's been a learning experience for everybody."

For more information about the Digital Inclusion Initiative, contact Ragan at 336-725-5614, ext. 3008.



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